

*Bill & Stephanie*  
&  
The Dramaturgy of Listening:  
Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker's  
Plays

by

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## Forward

This is a two-part playwriting thesis about how listening is central to creating and interacting with performance. First, is a play that I wrote called *Bill & Stephanie*, which centers on two couples and their single friend, who, over the course of the night, tells them about when he ran away from his life for two weeks, and what he discovered while away. The second part is an essay titled “The Dramaturgy of Listening: Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker’s Plays,” which investigates how listening functions in performance. The essay focuses on the work of Annie Baker, a contemporary playwright whose plays are known for their long pauses and silences, and dialogue that uncannily reflects everyday speech.

The play, *Bill & Stephanie* was shared with a student audience on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It will be presented to the public on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in the Ring Family Performing Arts Hall at the Wesleyan University Center for the Arts, and will be directed by Tekla Monson.

Annie Baker’s plays are formatted inconsistently in “The Dramaturgy of Listening” only to best represent the ways in which Dramatists Play Service and Theatre Communications Group represent her work on the page. All formatting of her work is theirs (hers and the publishers).

## ***Bill & Stephanie***

### Characters:

*Nate*, 30, Clara's husband, Daphne's brother  
*Clara*, 32, Nate's wife  
*Daphne*, 25, Winter's girlfriend, Nate's sister  
*Winter*, 26, Daphne's girlfriend  
*Stephen*, 24

### Setting

*The aftermath of a wedding reception.*

*Recently.*

### Notes on style and length:

I use line breaks to provide different types of  
Rhythm  
And choices  
For actors and directors.

Would an audience experiencing the script aurally feel  
Their presence?  
I don't know.  
I'm not  
Sure.

Also, there are lines that are word  
Splat vomit stream of consciousness description.  
These are meant to be moments of non-realism.

A "pause" is a speed bump. Pauses vary greatly in length and size.  
A "silence" is felt. It is heard. A song could fit into a "long silence."

This play is 70-80 minutes long.

“We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life. [...] It’s not quite love and it’s not quite community; it’s just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. When it’s four AM and no one goes to bed. That night with the guitar. That night we can’t remember. That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt. The hats.”

–Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*

*It's four in the morning,  
And what was a cool, crisp evening became a rainy night  
Hours ago.*

*The stage is  
A corner of a ballroom:  
Big round tables,  
Gold chairs,  
Ornate centerpieces,  
A half-eaten wedding cake in the corner,  
Near the bar.*

*The ballroom is huge,  
And stretches far beyond the stage and behind the audience.*

*There might be the remains of a DJ booth,  
Or a violin case and an abandoned cello,  
Or, a wedding band's pun name on a drum set,  
Near the dance floor,  
Which is barely onstage.*

*Stephen is sitting down,  
Alone at a table,  
With his head in his hands.  
It's hard to tell if he's asleep  
Or crying,  
But he's crying  
In a tuxedo.*

*Winter enters and takes a few tentative steps toward Stephen.  
Then,  
Deciding he's not worth the trouble  
Right now  
She backs offstage.  
Slowly,  
Guiltily.*

*Stephen tries to gather himself;  
He wipes his eyes.*

*Nate enters.  
He has on a similar tux,  
A nicer one, though,  
And he's taken off his jacket and tie,  
And rolled up the sleeves.*

**Nate**  
Dude.

*Pause.*

Hey  
Hey hey hey hey hey  
Hey.  
Hey.

**Stephen**  
I'm sorry.  
I'm sorry.

Weddings make me cry.

Weddings and funerals  
Weddings and funerals.

*Pause.*

I'm sorry.  
Ok.  
Okok  
Here we go.  
Here.  
We.  
Go.

*He makes a motion with his arms,  
Like he's trying to stand up,  
But the rest of his body doesn't move.  
Stephen looks up at Nate.  
And holds his arms out so Nate can hoist him up.  
Nate does nothing.  
Stephen's arms flop to his sides,  
Then lap.*

*A small, awkward silence.  
Stephen's eyes well up with tears.*

It's just  
All those people  
Here  
For them  
Bill

When he was standing up there  
And  
Stephanie  
Walking down the  
Rose petals  
Rings  
It was  
And then when they were up there  
Together  
So  
It was so

*Slight pause.*

Have you ever felt that?  
Like  
To be so

*Big pause.*

Like

*A big awkward pause.*

**Nate**  
Oh, buddy.  
C'mere, buddy.  
Buddy, buddy, buddy  
Buddy.

*Nate holds Stephen.*  
*Nate is much larger than Stephen.*  
*This is the only way Nate really knows how to comfort.*

Buddy...  
Shhh....

*He looks around for other people,*  
*But can't detach himself from Stephen.*

**Stephen**  
I'm sorry,  
I'm sorry.

**Nate**  
What's wrong?

*Stephen mumbles.*

Huh?  
Talk to me, come on.  
Come on.

**Stephen**  
It's just...  
To have that?

**Nate**  
What?

**Stephen**  
Yeah  
I don't know.  
You know  
You have it.

**Nate**  
I...

**Stephen**  
With Clara.

**Nate**  
Oh,  
Yeah.  
Yeah.

*An awkward pause.*

*Daphne runs on,  
Winter follows.  
Daphne runs straight to Stephen.*

**Daphne**  
Are you ok?  
Are you  
Are you...

**Stephen**  
What? Yeah.  
Weddings and funerals

**Daphne**

Are you  
What is he talking about?

**Nate**

He's fine.

**Winter**

Sorry  
I was just worried  
So I got

**Stephen**

You were..?

**Daphne**

She came and got me and

**Winter**

He was crying and

**Nate**

Yeah? So?

**Stephen**

Can't I

**Daphne**

You know what-

**Nate**

It was only

**Winter**

Seemed really sad

**Daphne**

We have to be

**Stephen**

Seriously?

**Winter**

So I ran and got

**Nate**

Letting off some steam

**Stephen**

Weddings and funerals

**Daphne**

I'm just trying to be-

**Nate**

CAN'T A GUY  
HAVE A GOOD  
MOTHER  
FUCKING  
CRY  
EVERY NOW AND THEN  
IN FUCKING PEACE  
WITHOUT PEOPLE  
BUTTING  
IN HIS  
MOTHER  
FUCKING  
BUSINESS  
???

*Silence.*

*Nobody looks at Nate.*

**Stephen** (*Breaking the tension*)

Really, guys.

I'm fine.

I'm not sad.

I'm not crying because I'm sad.

I'm crying

Well

Not joy

But tears of

I don't know

**Daphne**

Oh.

Uh

Ok.

Great.

**Nate**

I don't see what the big deal is  
Here.

**Winter**

Daph-

**Daphne**

Nate

**Nate**

What?  
Let the guy be

**Daphne**

*Nate.*

**Stephen** *(to Nate)*

Well,  
Uh,  
I don't think you know that, uh  
I went missing a few months ago  
So that's why  
I guess  
They're worried.

**Nate**

What

**Stephen**

I wanted to see  
How long it would take  
For people to notice  
I was gone?

So I ran away.  
It was stupid,  
Stupid.

**Daphne**

We were looking all over  
His roommates  
His family  
Nobody knew where he was.  
It was terrifying.  
I was terrified.

**Winter**

She was.

**Stephen**

Apparently,  
It was a big deal.

**Daphne**

Apparently?

**Stephen**

But, yeah  
I had to spend time in uh  
Psychiatric care  
After that.  
Three weeks  
Or whatever.  
And I feel good now.  
It feels like a long time  
Almost a lifetime  
It's been a long time since then  
It's nothing  
Really  
Really  
You guys don't have to

**Nate**

So that wasn't-

**Stephen**

I always cry at weddings.  
Really.  
Always.

*Clara enters.*

*With a raised, half-empty glass.*

**Clara** (*Sing-song, a toast and a roast*)

Bill and Stephanie  
Stephanie and Bill  
Kissy kissy kissy  
On a  
Hill  
Married together  
Forever more  
Three kids and a beach house

(**Nate** )  
(Ohh boy.)

On the shore  
Thirty-year mortgage  
Nine-to-five jobs  
Imported cars  
In their parking garage.  
What could end  
This bliss?  
Death  
Kidnapping  
Or a younger mistress.

*She bows.*  
*Pause.*

We used to sing that  
All the time.  
Every day  
Remember that?

*Pause.*

What?

**Nate**  
Nothing.

**Clara**  
What??

**Nate**  
Nothing..

**Winter**  
I remember it

**Daphne**  
I can't believe we

**Clara**  
I tried to get it going tonight

**Nate**  
We heard.  
Everyone heard.

**Daphne**

And then

**Stephen**

You tripped

**Winter**

That poor waiter

**Nate**

His poor shirt

**Clara**

You should never wear anything to a wedding

You're afraid will

Get stained.

**Daphne**

In any case

**Stephen**

Boom!

Ruckus

Pandemonium

People yelling

Taking pictures

Applauding

The whole event ground to a halt

So people could see who was causing trouble.

**Nate**

And

You were too busy laughing

And bowing

And waving

To keep on singing.

Which was good.

And then I brought you upstairs

And put you in your PJs

And poured you a glass of water

So you could drink it

And then *sleep*.

**Clara**

But I'm not tired.

I don't want to go to sleep.

**Daphne**

Bill's mother was *not* happy.  
Poor Susie.

**Winter** (*to Daphne*)

You were drunk.

**Clara**

We were all drunk.

**Nate**

You were pretty drunk,  
Hon.

**Winter**

You were like  
So drunk.

**Daphne**

So drunk  
The most  
Like,

*Clara glares.*

So so so so  
Sosososososooooo  
Drunk.

*Daphne laughs at herself.*

**Clara**

You're drunk.

**Daphne**

Huh what?

**Stephen** (*at the bar*)

We're all fucking drunk.  
It's 4 in the morning  
Our friends just got married  
With an open fucking bar  
Of course we're all drunk  
We drank

We're drunk  
It is what it is.

**Nate**

I can't get over  
Stephanie and Bill  
The way they were  
Here  
After the ceremony?  
Together

**Clara** (*singing*)

Bill and Stephanie  
Stephanie and Bill

**Nate**

I'm SAYING  
They were like  
Acting like-  
Bill doesn't dance  
But he was dancing  
Steph doesn't sing  
But she killed karaoke.  
Where did that come from?

**Daphne**

Their love?  
For each other?

**Nate**

Nonononono.  
That's not love  
That's adrenaline.  
That  
Watching that  
Watching them  
Made me feel so  
I looked around  
During the ceremony...  
Everyone was crying.  
All these people  
Crying  
Weeping.

And it's like...  
You don't understand

That

*(to Clara)*

I miss falling in love  
Going on dates  
Trying to impress each other  
Bragging to my friends about you  
About myself with you.  
Keeping secrets  
From you  
(Feet trash tv farts phobias plans).  
Keeping us a secret  
From the office?

**Clara**

This is how he talks to me  
About me  
To my face.

**Nate**

You don't feel the same?

**Clara**

I love  
How we've changed.  
You used to not know how to cook,  
Now you make dinner.  
You used to sleep in,  
Now you're up before I am  
Reading the newspaper  
Running  
Fantasy football whatever.

**Nate**

Yes.  
And you're still sleeping in.

I don't know why I'm the only one who has to work  
These days  
On myself  
On us.  
It's fucked up.

**Clara**

You're not

**Nate**

I am, I am  
I fucking am.  
Who tackled a waiter tonight  
And who carried who upstairs to our hotel room?

**Clara**

I tripped

**Nate**

Which one of us came downstairs  
And dealt with his sister's friend  
Fucking crying  
For no reason  
And which one of us came down  
To sing a fucking SONG  
We MADE UP  
When we LIVED IN GODDAMN BROOKLYN.  
We are supposed to be adults  
Getting older  
Aging  
And you're just  
Drunk.

**Stephen**

We're all drunk.

*Silence.*

*Nate is the only one standing.  
He's riled up,  
Pacing, maybe,  
Or doing something with his hands  
Like he can't let them be still  
But can't release his frustration  
Either.*

*He looks around at all of them.  
For a moment,  
Combativeness,  
Then,  
Relaxation.  
An exhale.*

**Winter**

I wonder if we're keeping anyone up.

**Clara**

Oh  
I don't care.

**Daphne**

The people

**Clara**

If they're actually tired, they'll sleep.

**Nate**

There's nowhere else to go.  
The place is  
Alright  
But it's the middle of nowhere

**Stephen**

It's her hometown!

**Nate**

That doesn't mean it's not  
Nowhere.

**Stephen**

Look.  
Let's go look.  
We'll see  
We can see.  
There are things,  
Right?  
Come on.

**Nate**

You're—

*Daphne's catches Nate's eye,  
And he stops short.  
He sighs.*

Fine, fine.

*Stephen grabs Nate and they run outside.*

**Clara**

People should stay up late.  
It's a wedding!

What do you think people do after weddings?  
It's not just the bride and groom.

**Daphne**

I know

**Clara**

And in a hotel...

*Pause.*

What?

What else is there to talk about?

**Daphne**

I don't know.

**Winter**

What about you and Nate?

Where did you

Meet?

**Clara**

I don't remember.

**Daphne**

Work.

**Clara**

Oh, right.

Work.

**Winter**

That's nice.

We met at a gallery.

At an opening.

Friends of friends' show

Even in a place as big as

New York Chicago Paris LA Berlin Tokyo

It still feels like a small scene

Small world

Everyone knows everyone

Pretty much.

**Daphne**

It wasn't until we hung out

Alone

That we realized

**Winter**

That we knew

**Daphne**

That we like...

That we got along.

*She looks at Clara, excited.*

*Clara clearly isn't interested.*

*An awkward pause.*

**Daphne** (*changing the subject*)

What was that music?

That they were playing?

**Clara**

Disco?

**Daphne**

Is that what it was?

**Winter**

No-

**Daphne**

It was

Crappy but good.

You could really dance to it.

And we were dancing

Oh!

You're a good dancer!

You're really good.

You were like

*Daphne imitates Winter dancing*

*She tries to get Winter to join in.*

*Winter doesn't.*

**Daphne** (*cont'd*)

Come on!

*Nate and Stephen reenter*

*They are soaking wet.*

*Nate more than Stephen,  
Who'd used his jacket as an umbrella.*

**Nate**

What a crappy night.

**Stephen**

It's really raining.

**Daphne** (*still dancing*)

Mhm.

**Clara**

Look at you.

**Nate**

Holy fucking shit  
It's so fucking wet

**Clara**

At least it waited until everyone was inside.

**Nate**

Yeah, well  
I was right  
There's nothing out there.

**Stephen**

A little rain never hurt anyone!

**Winter**

Is it that bad?

**Clara**

It's fine, you're fine.  
He's fine.

**Nate**

I need a towel.

*(Into the hall)*

Towel!

**Clara**

Jesus.

**Winter**

Here.

*Winter gets some rags from behind the bar.  
The men dry off with them  
As best they can.*

*They hear footsteps upstairs,  
And all look up,  
Or out towards the lobby.  
Like kids who are caught somewhere they're not supposed to be,  
Because  
They don't know if they're supposed to be there  
Or not.*

**Nate**

We did see some lights on upstairs.

*Everyone waits, nervously, for another moment.  
Nobody comes in.  
They relax into a long silence.*

*People get drinks,  
And settle in,  
Now lounging on the floor  
Or on tables  
Or the bar.*

*The ballroom that was so unfamiliar to them at the beginning of the night,  
Now feels almost theirs.*

*They listen to the rain for a while.*

**Clara**

You know what they say about rain on your wedding day.

**Winter**

I don't.  
Do you?

**Daphne**

No.

**Nate**

It's their wedding night  
Now

Not day.  
So it doesn't matter.

**Clara** (*not caring*)  
It's supposed to be bad luck, isn't it?  
Right?

**Winter**  
I've never heard that.

**Daphne**  
Makes sense.

**Clara**  
Like, there's the song.

**Winter**  
What song?

**Clara** (*tentatively misquoting Funny Girl*)  
Don't rain on my wedding...?

**Daphne**  
Oh shit!

**Nate**  
Shit, fuck yeah!

**Clara**  
You know the song?

**Daphne**  
We know that song.

**Nate**  
Babs.

**Daphne**  
We *love* that song.

**Nate**  
Baaaabs.

**Daphne**  
But it's

*Daphne and Nate set themselves up  
To impersonate Barbara Streisand,  
In a way that makes it clear  
This isn't the first time they're doing this:*

**Daphne** (*cont'd*)  
NOBODY NO NOBODY  
IS GONNA  
RAIN ON MYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

**Daphne & Nate**  
PAAAAAAAAAAARAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAADE!

*They stand there,  
Panting,  
For a sec.*

*A stunned silence.*

**Clara**  
So you know the song.

**Daphne**  
Of course we know it.  
But it's about a parade,  
Not a wedding.  
And I think it's more of a metaphor?  
Like an extended metaphor  
Not, like  
A superstition.

**Stephen**  
Rain,  
On your wedding day  
It's actually a good thing.

**Winter** (*looking on her phone*)  
Here it just says "tears."

*Clara, Daphne, and Nate clump around Winter's phone.*

**Stephen**  
Uh, it-

**Clara**  
It does.

Huh.

**Nate**

I can see that.

**Daphne**

I can totally, totally see that.

**Stephen** (*who nobody is listening to*)

Actually,

It's supposed to symbolize,

Uh,

Fertility,

Bounty,

Unity, uh,

Washing away your past and starting fresh

...

Et cetera.

Traditionally.

I think a lot of people just don't like rain, so they think

They say that

It's God crying

Or some bullshit like that

To get other people to think it's bad luck

**Daphne** (*reading from phone*)

Other things that are supposed to symbolize tears at weddings:

Pearls

And almonds

Onion soup

Peonies

Yellow roses.

Those are all bad luck.

So is seeing a nun

Or a monk

Or a pregnant woman

Or dropping your ring

Or wearing your dress beforehand

Or making your own wedding dress

Oh, oh, oh!

But here

*Here*

It says that crying is actually *good* luck.

If the bride cries

It means she's shed all her tears

Before the marriage

And the marriage itself will be happy  
And tearless.

**Winter** *(to Daphne, genuinely)*

I love you.

**Daphne**

I love you.

**Clara** *(to Nate)*

I love you.

*Nate moves to the bar  
He gives this speech from behind it,  
Like a gregarious bartender,  
Entertaining his late-night regulars.*

*Partway through, he discovers an unopened bottle of champagne.*

**Nate**

Back when Bill and Steph met  
And when we met them  
I didn't think they'd stick it out  
But,  
Here we are  
At their wedding.  
Let's drink to that.

*(to Clara)*

They were our neighbors,  
Back in that  
(God)  
That building in Brooklyn?  
That apartment—  
Slanted floors grubby windows smelly carpet.  
We'd run into them  
In the street  
And talk about how we were all going to move  
Out of there.

**Clara**

*I loved Brooklyn.*

*Nate opens the bottle.*

**Nate**

My point is  
They were fighting constantly  
Back then.  
And now  
They're making the whole thing legally binding,  
Till death do they part.  
Isn't that something?  
Can you believe people still do that?

**Clara**

You did it.  
You're married.  
To me.

**Nate**

And now we're the ones fighting.

**Clara**

What?  
And that's my fault?

**Nate**

No, I

**Clara**

I wanted to get married to you  
Because I love you  
And I did  
And I do.  
But I loved where we lived, too  
That apartment-

*She shakes her head.*

I can't start talking about it,  
I'll get too angry.

**Stephen** (*looking at the wedding cake*)  
It is a big commitment.

**Clara**

Yeah, of course it is, but (*to Nate*) you don't have to-

**Daphne**

So intense about it...

**Winter**

Life or death.

**Stephen**

Way, way too intense.

*Nate is too busy handing out the champagne  
To notice  
Or care.*

*A pause:  
People sip their drinks.  
Everyone is tired.*

**Daphne**

But it is a super intense thing...  
Like  
Have you ever been cliff jumping?  
Nate and I when we would go up North growing up,  
There were these cliffs you'd jump off of  
Nothing crazy, like 20 feet  
And you'd, you'd  
You'd be standing there  
At the edge  
And you knew you could do it,  
Because your friend did it  
But you'd still have to, you know, say in your head,  
One two  
Three.  
And on three you'd jump,  
And you'd fall down,  
And there was always just enough time  
When you were in the air  
Before you hit the water  
That you could really *feel* that  
Like, you were so *aware* of  
You're falling  
And then SMACK the water hits your feet  
And it stings and you swim up as fast as you can  
Because you go so deep  
And you gasp for air  
And everyone cheers  
And it's all ok  
And good  
And when you think back on it,  
It was all really fun and worth it,

But when you're up there waiting...

*Silence, for a moment.*

*Then Stephen speaks into the silence.*

**Stephen**

I met

The happiest couple that I've ever met

When I left—

When I was in

Vermont.

They were so happy

I wanted to

Uh, like,

Punch them in the face?

You know?

*Pause.*

**Daphne**

No.

**Stephen**

Yeah

So this couple

In line for coffee one morning

After I'd been there for a couple of days.

They had on those big hiking backpacks,

Bandanas,

Rain jackets,

Boots,

You know,

Gear.

Tall guy, tiny lady,

Beard sunglasses smile

Rosy cheeks blue eyes

Loud voices.

This old guy

That they'd met online somehow

Took us to his farm

About a half an hour out of town,

Yeah.

When we got to the farm, the old guy led the three of us to the guest bedroom.

“There’s only one bed,” he said to us, like,  
We were gong to have to fight for it  
The tall guy had already laid down on it, over the covers, kicking off his boots.  
“No problem partner,” he told the guy, “no problem at all.”  
I wound up sleeping on the floor.

We ate dinner that night with the old guy  
And his family.  
All of their kids hated school  
And whined about it  
So much  
All night.

We worked there next few days  
Fixing things, feeding the animals,  
Simple stuff.  
The couple  
They liked moving things around,  
A lot  
Collecting piles of plywood  
Then moving them  
15 feet further down the grass  
To where I was fixing this huge fence.  
Then another 15 feet  
And another  
And another  
Talking the whole time  
About  
People places dog breeds food air fares hiking boots vistas.

Eventually, they told me they were moving on.  
I decided to stay.  
I kept on working  
Mending the same fence  
Until  
Until it was all mended.

*Pause.*

**Clara**  
Did they have rings?

**Stephen**  
I don’t remember

**Clara**

You have to check!

**Daphne**

They probably weren't even married

**Nate**

Doesn't sound like it.

**Winter**

They could just be traveling together

Like

Platonically.

People do that all the time.

**Stephen**

They were definitely together.

**Clara**

How do you know?

Are you sure?

**Nate**

No wait

They didn't

They didn't like

Do

*It*

Or anything

When you were

I mean

Sleeping

On the floor

Next to them

Or anything?

**Stephen**

Yep.

*Everyone groans.*

**Winter**

Doesn't mean they were married

Or dating

It just means

**Nate**

That is rough.

**Stephen**

It really-

**Daphne**

Yeah that is pretty rough.

**Nate**

What about the people who lived above us

Clara?

So many parties.

In Brooklyn?

And it was like

Close the gym

Am I right?

**Clara**

I thought we weren't talking about

**Nate**

It just reminded me

Because we could hear them

*You know*

Too.

So

**Clara**

Yes but that's not what we're

**Nate**

I know but

**Daphne**

Nate-

**Winter**

Let them-

**Stephen**

Guys-

**Nate**

I don't understand why

You care about

That apartment.  
 We left it.  
 We're past it, and  
 We're married now  
 We're old.  
 That's who we are.  
 And what, living like college kids  
 In some hobo first apartment  
 Would change that?  
 Having three jobs, scraping by?  
 I want a career  
 I want stability  
 I want a family.  
 We're supposed to be working towards all that  
 Together.  
 We're getting older  
 Growing old  
 Together.  
 That's the choice we made.

**Clara**

I wake up every day  
*We* wake up  
 And we make the choice  
 The active choice  
 To keep this thing  
 Our marriage  
 Our *love*  
 Going.  
 It's not something we did  
 And are stuck with.  
 We get older,  
 We change,  
 We improve ourselves,  
 We make sacrifices,  
 But...

Yes, there were cockroaches in that apartment  
 Sometimes  
 Yes, the floor was slanted  
 But only in the kitchen!  
 Its little porch  
 Our neighbor's basil, mint, and thyme in their window box  
 The way they smelled when you unlocked the front door  
 That friendly fat cat  
 And old, quiet dog

That would lay out near the door in the summer.  
 Whose were those?  
 The single-digit apartment numbers  
 The old lady landlord who could never pronounce my name.  
*Cl-air-uh, Cl-air-uh, Cl-air-uh*, she said.  
 And I'd say, "It's Cl-are-uh, actually?"  
 And she'd say, "Sorry Cl-air-uh!"  
 The park just around the corner from our house  
 Strollers mommy-bloggers overpaid babysitters.  
 All you remember is the dirt.  
 Then where did we move?  
 Why?

**Nate**

We

**Clara** (*getting angry now*)  
 Because when we left work  
 We'd get on the opposite platform  
 As the people we worked with?  
 Because you'd see them,  
 Over there  
 Ties loose  
 Chatting  
 Laughing  
 Connecting  
 And you wanted to be a part of that?  
 Because,  
 Eventually,  
 You had it with those long train rides  
 Across town  
 To see your friends on weekends.  
 You'd never take a book  
 Or headphones  
 You'd sit there  
 Next to me  
 Staring  
 Staring  
 Staring at the stops left before we got home.  
 And even though I was happy  
 With where we were  
 We moved  
 To a glass building  
 Iron and glass and granite and keyless doors  
 Sleepy doormen  
 Barking dogs

Trash on the street  
For what?  
So you're in the right neighborhood?  
*Silence.*

You can't tell me that I don't do this  
For love  
Because  
If I didn't love you I'd have stayed in Brooklyn.  
Where I can breathe.

*A long silence.*  
*Nobody relaxes.*

**Winter**  
Well you can hardly blame them.

**Stephen**  
For

**Winter**  
For thinking the poor guy was asleep and doing it  
In a bed  
Right next to him.

**Nate**  
Oh god.

**Winter**  
What?  
They can't  
Want each other like  
That?

*Pause.*

**Stephen**  
I got used to it,  
Really.

**Nate**  
No  
Yeah  
They can

**Winter**

Daphne and I  
 When we first met  
 Well,  
 When we first started going out  
 All we would do was have sex.  
 Every time we hung out.  
 Nighttime  
 Daytime  
 Around other people  
 It didn't matter.  
 We'd fuck.  
 We'd go to a gallery opening,  
 Talk about it,  
 See friends,  
 Eat some cheese and crackers,  
 Go home,  
 And fuck.  
 Go to a reading,  
 Mingle, talk literature,  
 Go home,  
 And fuck.  
 Go to a movie,  
 And fuck.  
 Go out to dinner,  
 Get ice cream,  
 Have a nightcap,  
 And fuck.  
 It got to the point  
 Where  
 Every night  
 For a stretch, a long stretch  
 Too long  
 We'd be at each other's houses  
 Until two, three, four, five, six,  
 Seven in the morning.  
 Sleeping, not sleeping,  
 Fucking, not fucking,  
 Watching TV,  
 Listening to music,  
 Ignoring the TV,  
 Ignoring the music,  
 And fucking.

*Pause;*

*Winter remembers.*

**Daphne**

How is that supposed to make him feel any better?

**Winter**

I don't know.

I just thought

**Daphne**

Well now everyone knows how much we

Fucking fucked

Right?

So...

**Clara**

I liked it.

**Winter**

I didn't even talk about the

**Stephen**

Hey.

Hey.

I'm just wondering

Why does everybody feel like they need to give me advice?

Just because, you know

You're all married.

**Nate**

What? No.

**Winter**

Stephen...

**Daphne**

We're not married

**Winter**

Absolutely not

**Daphne**

Absolutely not?

**Winter**

Well,

**Nate**

Yes?

**Clara**

Nate.

**Daphne**

Well, don't you think that

I mean we might

One day

You don't think about that?

**Winter**

Are you asking

**Daphne**

No!

**Winter**

No?

**Daphne**

No, I mean-

Yes I mean no

Like

You know

I'm just *thinking* about it.

**Winter**

We don't have to talk about this now.

**Daphne**

I want to,

Though.

**Winter**

I mean

I don't know

If I believe in it

In that way?

**Daphne**

What

**Winter**

Like,

Why do you need to be so  
Make such a big deal out of  
What's our little thing

**Daphne**  
Little?

**Winter**  
I didn't-

**Nate**  
No one is going to deny  
My baby sister  
The wedding she's been dreaming about.

No one is going to keep me  
From giving the toast  
I've been working on  
Every evening commute  
Since I got married  
So that  
The time comes  
When I get to transfer this note  
To Microsoft word  
And print it out  
To put into the breast pocket  
Of a rented tux  
And read it.  
In front of everyone we've ever known and loved throughout our entire lives  
On the biggest most important special spiritual day  
Of my sister's life.  
You can't deny me that.

**Clara**  
So that's what you were doing  
On the train  
That's what you were thinking about  
That whole time  
When we were  
When I was standing next to you  
In a crowded  
No room to breathe,  
To think  
To put my headphones in  
And you'd be there, next to me  
Falling over at every stop and start

Grabbing onto my arm to stay on your feet  
Staring at your phone  
Staring at the stops left  
At the ads  
And I'd ask what you were thinking about  
Or how your day was  
Or where we should have dinner  
And you'd say  
Nothing fine anywhere I'm not that hungry.  
That's what you were doing  
Instead of  
Looking at  
Being with  
Me?

*Pause.*

**Nate**  
Yes.

**Clara**  
Ugh.

**Winter**  
Well, I'm not

**Daphne**  
It's fine

**Stephen**  
It's not about you,  
Dude.

**Winter**  
He's right.

**Stephen**  
It's about them  
And their  
Love  
Or whatever.

**Nate**  
Who are weddings for  
If not the families?  
You

You suffer through it  
 You...  
 Standing up there in something itchy.  
 Do you think Bill and Stephanie like string quartets?  
 Do you think they danced their first dance  
 To their favorite song?  
 A song that will remind them  
 Of each other  
 Every time they hear its opening note?  
 No.  
 They're going to hear that song  
 In a few months  
 At another wedding  
 And one will turn to the other  
 And say  
 "Didn't this play at our wedding?"  
 And the answer will be yes  
 Because it was Grandma's favorite  
 And she insisted on it.

**Clara**

What about our wedding?  
 You didn't think about me?  
 I was thinking about you  
 About us, our future  
 The whole time.  
 I'm serious  
 It didn't matter how uncomfortable  
 How boring  
 How the wax burned my hand when we lit the candle together  
 How your mother talked to you more than I did at dinner  
 Your sister's crappy music taste  
 Those goddamn cigars.  
 None of that got in the way of  
 It couldn't ruin what was still  
 Our  
*Our* day  
 To me.  
 Our one day  
 Our beginning.

**Winter**

A wedding is a wedding,  
 Is a wedding,  
 Is a wedding.  
 No matter how you do it.

There are steampunk weddings  
Bathtub weddings  
Space-themed weddings,  
Underwater weddings,  
Televised weddings,  
Unplugged weddings,  
Shotgun weddings,  
Mass weddings,  
Intimate weddings,  
Reality TV weddings,  
Spiteful weddings,  
Young people weddings,  
Old people weddings,  
Country club weddings,  
Second weddings,  
Third weddings,  
Fourth weddings,  
Triumphant weddings...  
It's the same  
If you say your vows in gibberish  
Or Latin.

**Clara**

But  
I saw you  
Crying during the ceremony.  
And you  
And you  
And...

*Clara can't call out Nate,  
Because she can't find him.  
They all look around for him.*

*He's snuck back into a corner  
Where the cake is,  
And is slicing it.  
Quietly.*

*They notice him, there,  
And watch him  
Cut the cake.*

*There is some silence.  
And then some more.  
He only starts talking when he realizes that everyone's looking at him.*

**Nate**

I don't want to say that we got married when we were  
Too  
Young naive passionate physical idealistic  
But...  
There's nothing wrong with getting married young  
Is what we told ourselves  
And it's true  
For some people  
But for us...  
We made this promise to each other  
Our old selves made this promise to each other  
And now  
Neither of us are those people.  
That doesn't mean we don't  
Or didn't  
Or do  
Love.  
But...

And I'm not saying that we should  
(Ugh)  
(Divorce)  
Or you know  
Anything like that  
But I'm saying that things change and we  
Struggle  
Are struggling to  
Keeping up with those changes,  
Aren't we?

Yes, we're trying  
And we're going to keep on trying.  
And it will be ok  
It will be  
Alright.

*There is some silence after this.*

Can someone help me out with this cake?

**Winter**

Gluten-free.

**Daphne**

A small slice

For me  
Very small.  
I have nightmares if I eat before bed.

**Winter**  
Really?

**Daphne**  
Oh shut up.  
*Clara, Daphne, and Stephen go to the cake,  
And collect some  
From Nate.*

*A long silence.*

**Stephen**  
When I got back to New York  
By the time I got on the train back  
From Vermont  
My phone was dead,  
My clothes were dirty,  
And I was dead tired.  
I got back to my apartment around 2am.  
My roommates were asleep.

I'd been gone for about a week and a half.

When I went into work the next day, there was someone else  
There.  
Sitting at my little desk.  
When they asked who I was, I just left.

When I got home  
I looked at Facebook for the first time in two weeks  
And I just had this moment  
Like  
My friends  
My world  
Had carried on without me.

It felt like  
Being gone  
Those nights sleeping on the floor in Vermont—  
That was my real life.  
Like where I was  
In the city,

Surrounded by people,  
Noise  
Chaos  
That was where I was running away to,  
Not the other way around.

I'm here  
With you all  
Who are  
You know  
Together  
And I'm  
You know...

**Clara**  
It's nothing like that.

**Stephen**  
It is! It is.  
Isn't it?  
It totally is.  
It's exactly that.

**Winter**  
Stephen, calm down.

**Nate**  
Stephen, buddy.

**Daphne**  
I don't want to say that I'm worried about you  
In a way that would be  
Condescending  
Or anything.  
But...

**Winter**  
We all seem to be growing up, getting older.

**Nate**  
With each other

**Winter**  
With other people, yeah, and

**Nate**

Now we're starting to think that  
That

**Clara**

Where's that person for you, right?  
Like

**Nate**

We want this thing for you  
Not because we think you *need* it  
No, no it's not that  
At all.

**Winter**

We're just a part of these  
Things  
That, yeah, are hard  
But they keep us going

**Daphne**

It keeps me going.

**Nate**

They keep us going.

**Clara**

Right.

**Daphne**

And we want that, for you,  
Right?  
We all do, I think.

*Pause.*

**Stephen**

Great.

*Silence.*

**Winter**

Do you know that feeling of  
Your neck is tight  
Your arms are tired  
And you think

I just need a massage  
Or something  
And you rub your own neck  
And roll your shoulders  
Or take a hot shower  
But the knots stay.  
Your shoulders don't relax.  
You're not  
Relaxed.  
You need someone else  
That  
You can call when you're walking home  
For no reason.  
Someone you have dinner with  
Every night  
Unless you make other plans  
And if you were to eat without them  
Or vice versa  
It would be strange.  
It might not even feel like dinner.

**Nate** (*to Stephen*)

Hey  
How about I introduce you-

**Stephen**

No

**Daphne**

What if

**Stephen**

No

**Nate**

Someone from

**Stephen**

No

**Clara**

I know this

**Stephen**

No

**Daphne**

Why don't you call

**Stephen**

Really

**Daphne**

Or I can email

**Stephen**

Thanks but

**Nate**

Makes great salmon

**Stephen**

I appreciate

**Nate**

Steak?

**Stephen**

Guys

Guys guys guys

Guys

Guys

Guys guys

Guys.

I'm fine.

*Pause.*

It's fine

It's totally totally totally...

Fine.

I'm fine.

*Pause.*

**Winter**

We talk about marriage

But we never talk about why we think it's

Necessary.

When we talk about it

We really just mean  
Like  
Adult life.  
Why legally codify something  
A relationship  
That's so personal  
And so organic?

**Daphne**

I don't know.

**Clara**

Because it's what we need  
To be secure.  
Right?  
To be sure that it won't disappear  
Poof  
Like that.

To be held,  
Beholden  
Legally  
To another person  
Should totally be intimidating and scary and institutional  
But that shouldn't stop  
That shouldn't keep us  
From actually caring  
From really trying  
Nurturing what we-

**Winter**

I mean,  
Other animals don't have  
Weddings  
Do they?

**Daphne**

I wish they did.  
Imagine that  
Imagine that.

**Nate**

I am.

**Winter**

But there are

Monogamous species  
Beavers  
Albatrosses  
Penguins  
Macaws  
Vultures  
Barn Owls  
Turtle Doves  
Wolves  
Swans  
Just to name a few,  
But did you know  
In the five thousand different kinds of mammals  
Only  
Three  
To five  
Per-cent  
Mate for life?

**Daphne**

Which makes us the exception to the rule.

**Winter**

If we are  
In fact  
Exceptions to the rule.  
Who really knows?

**Nate**

They haven't figured that out.

**Winter**

Science isn't perfect.  
Nobody can predict the weather  
Perfectly  
It's all just guesswork.

**Daphne**

But  
There's NOAA Weather Radio  
And  
Radar  
And everything.

**Winter**

Educated guesswork.

*Silence.*  
*Nobody has anything to say.*  
*Droopy eyes yawns heavy limbs thoughts of sleep.*

**Clara**  
It's late.

**Nate**  
Yeah.

**Clara**  
I can't figure out what anyone's talking about  
Anymore.

**Nate**  
Yeah.

**Clara**  
Let's go to bed.

**Nate**  
Yeah.  
Oh!  
No.  
Wait  
Waitwaitwaitwaitwaitwaitwait  
Wait.

*Nate runs behind the bar,*  
*And finds an aux cord*  
*For his phone.*  
*He plugs it in, and it makes that horrible crunching sound in the speakers.*  
*He plays a wedding song,*  
*That he and Clara danced to*  
*At their wedding,*  
*And comes out from behind the bar.*

**Clara**  
Oh.  
What is  
?

**Nate**  
Can we  
Do you want to  
One more

A last  
Dance  
Before bed?

**Clara**  
Oh.  
Yes.

*The song starts.  
He puts his arms around her.  
She leans into him.  
The rest of them watch.*

Is this from...?

**Nate**  
No.

**Clara**  
Oh.  
It sounds like

**Nate**  
I know.

*They dance, the two of them.*

*Then, Winter and Daphne dance, too,  
Close by,  
Once Nate and Clara have forgotten  
They're not alone  
In the room.*

*Stephen does a little twirly thing  
By himself.  
A solo.  
Before fixing himself a drink  
And settling down.*

*The couples move across the stage,  
Sometimes in sync,  
Sometimes on totally, completely, different wavelengths.*

*Nate and Clara stop dancing before the song is over,  
And wave goodbye to Stephen,  
And skirt around Winter and Daphne,*

*Who are still dancing,  
On their way out.*

*By the time the song fades out,  
Winter and Daphne sit together  
Holding each other  
Far away (across the stage) from Stephen.*

**Daphne**

Do you think I could  
Guess the weather?  
Correctly?  
Like exactly exactly right?

**Winter**

How would you-

**Daphne**

I don't know.  
Send a balloon into space  
With a little camera.  
Or just guess  
Something  
I want to guess something right.  
Nothing terrible  
Just like  
A tornado in Oklahoma  
Or a thunderstorm in Oregon  
Or a cold snap in Minnesota  
Something common  
But uncommon enough  
That it's still special.

**Winter**

I have no idea what you're talking about.

**Daphne**

I love the Weather Channel  
All those awkward people  
Don't you?  
You don't  
Don't you.

**Winter**

I like listening to music  
Podcasts

Things that people made.  
Art,  
Not

**Daphne**  
But but but  
They're sweeties!

**Winter**  
You don't like  
*Watch* them  
You just put it on.

**Daphne**  
Do you remember  
The stars  
When we went for  
A walk  
Last summer?

**Winter**  
When?

**Daphne**  
When we went  
Up North,  
Ya dingus.

**Winter**  
Oh, oh yeah.  
*That* walk.

**Daphne**  
There were so many  
And the Milky Way  
Up there too.  
You never see that in the city.  
Only in the middle of nowhere.

**Winter**  
Can we go back soon?

**Daphne**  
If I can get vacation days

**Winter**

And if your parents let you use the cabin after

**Daphne**

The stain came out!  
The stain came out  
She thinks she can still see it but  
The stain came out.

**Winter**

I know  
I know  
I know  
I know  
I know.

*They fall asleep  
Accidentally  
Together.*

*If there are windows in this ballroom  
We can see the first light of the morning.  
If there aren't,  
Stephen looks at his watch.*

**Stephen**

Good morning.

*Silence.  
Then, with a smile:*

Good mornin',  
Good mornin',  
We've talked the whole night through.

Good mornin',  
Good mornin',  
To you...  
Ba-da ba-da ba-da ba-da-da-da-da.

Do you ever wake up  
Too early?  
And since you can't fall back asleep  
You walk out  
You go outside  
Down your block

And everything is closed  
And no one is around  
And it's terrifying.  
Because if you go out late  
Like late at night  
There are still things happening,  
Really really late into the night,  
But early in the morning, it's...  
Stillness  
Silence  
Sleep.

*He looks to the audience for a response.*

Me neither.

That morning  
When I ran away  
When I left New York  
It had been another week of plans falling through.  
People forgetting to meet up  
Or follow up  
Or getting lazy  
At the last minute  
Refusing take the subway to meet me  
Refusing to go to the restaurant  
Where I was  
Because we'd made reservations  
There  
Yesterday.

That morning  
I woke up early  
(Which I usually don't do)  
I woke up so early  
That  
It felt completely dark outside.  
I went to the kitchen  
To make coffee  
An entire pot  
For me and my roommates  
The three of us.

I looked outside our kitchen window.  
The sun was just beginning  
The sky was getting brighter

Like it is right now.  
The city was still.  
The city is never still.  
I closed my eyes for a second  
I tried to take a snapshot of that stillness  
The darkness  
The morning light.  
I was concentrating so hard.

And then  
A car drove by  
A dog barked  
And I opened my eyes.

There was a lady walking her dog,  
On the street below the window.  
It was sniffing the trashcan below my building  
For a few minutes  
Before she started yelling at it.  
TAKE A PISS  
TAKE A PISS  
PISS PISS PISS  
PIIIIIIISS.

The dog looked up at her with this look, like,  
“There should be nothing that stops you from sniffing wherever you want, for as long  
as you want, as long as what you’re sniffing is fascinating and satisfying to you, why  
can’t you understand that?”

That’s when I knew  
I had to leave.

*Stephen stands up,  
And moves  
Closer to the couple onstage,  
Carrying his glass along with him.*

There’s this diner in Rutland  
Where I ate  
The waitress asked what I was doing there  
Like  
She knew  
That I was gone  
That I had left somewhere.  
I told her that I had to get out of New York.  
She nodded.

“Too many people down there,” she said.  
“That’ll fuck you up.”  
I asked her where she was from,  
She said Staten Island.

Isn’t that funny?  
I asked her why she moved to Vermont  
And she said ‘for school’  
And when I asked why Rutland  
She just said  
“Husband.”  
Not in a resentful way.  
With a shrug:  
Just,  
“Husband.”

*A long pause.*  
*Maybe he refills his glass.*

I’m not scared of being by myself  
I like being alone  
I like  
Reading.  
But being alone forever...

I was the kid who was afraid of roller coasters.  
Who would hold my friends backpacks  
While they waited in line  
And went on the ride  
And I’d watch  
And breathe in the theme park fumes  
And sweat through my shirt  
And count how much cash I had left  
For the midway  
And make sure that my car keys were still in my pocket  
And look next to me on the bench  
There are always waiting benches  
At the mothers  
And babysitters  
Who were there  
Watching the kids on the ride  
With me.  
They’d be reading  
Or knitting,  
Sometimes.  
But mostly they just watched

They just sat there  
In their comfortable pants  
And watched the ride  
Looking for their kids  
Following their progress  
So they could stand up  
So they could be ready  
Right when the kid came wobbling out of the gate  
Smiling green-faced windswept amped up thrilled  
To go to the next ride.

I think about that  
Sometimes  
And I worry I'm still watching the ride  
Instead of getting on.

*Silence.*

*He clangs a fork against his glass  
Which shatters the silence,  
Ceremonially.  
(Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding).*

*At this point, he is downstage of Daphne and Winter,  
In his own light,  
In his own focus,  
For the first time,  
Really.*

You don't need to impress each other  
To have a good marriage.  
You don't need to be codependent  
Or, even, exclusive  
Sexually, romantically  
To have a good marriage  
Or relationship  
Or whatever it is  
For the two three four five of you....  
You don't have to like the same rides  
Or restaurants  
To have a good marriage.  
You don't need the same friends  
You don't need a dog  
You don't need a bidet  
You don't need to laugh at each other's jokes.  
You don't need to show your love in the same way

Or need to be loved in the same way  
To have a good marriage  
You don't need to stay married  
To have a good marriage.

There are so many things you don't need  
Because  
You have each other.

*Pause.*

*Stephen opens his mouth,  
Closes it,  
And raises his glass.*

To Bill and Stephanie.

*End of Play.*

**The Dramaturgy of Listening:  
Understanding Theatrical Auality Through Annie Baker's Plays**

“What does it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all its being?” -Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>1</sup>

Introduction

There is an immense number of similarities between the simple, everyday act of listening and attending a performance. For instance, performance is a mode of communication that is simultaneously produced and consumed, and its existence is dependent on the existence of a consumer. That is, without an audience there is no performance just as without a listener, speech is just noise. At a performance, the audience is given the task *to listen*. This means hearing the piece, but also watching it and feeling the emotional and physical state of the room around them; to listen, in this context, is also *to experience*. In this essay, I will investigate the inherent aural aspect of the experience of attending and interpreting performance, and specifically, the playwright's role in creating the aural mode in which their plays operate. This analysis will also discuss listening as it pertains to the dramaturgical content of theater: what playwrights are giving attention to on stage. Annie Baker, whose work I will focus on, puts listening at the forefront of her plays, in both her craft and her content.

Annie Baker uses pauses and silences in her plays a lot— so much so that half of her actors' time on stage could be spent in silence. Her silences constantly situate the audience as listeners and give them the aural space between lines to remember they are sitting in a theater watching a play. Her dialogue is written with a keen ear to the way people talk on day-to-day basis, with 'um's, 'uh's, and other stumbles

abound. The subjects of her plays are everyday people—not general or ‘everyman’ characters, but people who have overlooked jobs and live in overlooked places—coffee shop boys in rural Vermont, movie theater workers, Gettysburg B&B proprietors, and the like.

This essay is titled “The Dramaturgy of Listening” because it is an investigation of the ways listening is essential to performance, and especially to theater, which tends to be a text-driven mode of performance. Dramaturgy is a formal term for the analysis of plays and performances’ dramatic structures; the structure of the piece itself (plot, character, musicality), and the meta-structures that surround the play as an ephemeral object (historical context, playwright’s history and positionality, the cannon of material the play is responding to/acting within). These are the lenses through which I will explore how listening is vital to performance, and how this vitality is utilized and explored through Baker’s writing. Dramaturgy, then, for the purpose of this essay, is the discipline through which ‘listening’ will be discussed, as I trace where it enters the conceptual conversation surrounding Baker’s work. Listening is much more difficult to define, and the project of the first section of this essay (Sound & the Voice) will be to shape a definition of listening that will be used throughout the rest of the piece.

So why use Annie Baker’s plays to investigate how listening intersects with playwriting? There is no contemporary playwright whose work feels and sounds more reflective of the way that people converse than Annie Baker. She’s an extremely culturally and critically relevant contemporary playwright-- her work includes *The Flick*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2014, she is a resident playwright at

Signature Theater, and is a 2017 MacArthur Fellow. Baker's work is highly regarded and well-recognized by both critics and producers, and she is currently writing for and supported by non-profit spaces that are dedicated to playwriting as art (i.e. their investment is beyond commercial; it is also artistic). She writes plays incredibly attentive to the way people exist together, radically employing silences and "realistically inarticulate bumbling" rather than heightened, "theatrical" dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Baker's writing is, itself, an act of listening. Her work is so embedded with and reflective of day-to-day conversation that it is an exercise in listening as much as it is reading, writing, acting, or directing. She asks her audience to be listeners too, by employing theatrical tactics that constantly remind them that they're at a performance, that they're bound to be attentive to what's happening in front of them, and that every word that's said on stage matters.

### Sound & the Voice

Simply put, to listen is to be on the receiving end of aural communication. To attain a more complete understanding of what listening is, it is imperative to understand and investigate sonic objects, especially the voice, which we rely on for the bulk of communication, especially what gets presented in plays. Performance theorists, including Jean-Luc Nancy, Lynne Kendrick, and Ross Brown have only just begun discussing sound and the voice in the past fifteen years or so. Before then, sound in performance was studied as an element of design, similar to the way light influences performances, rather than as an intrinsic part of the mode of performance itself. In this section, I talk about the specific phenomenon or categorization of *voice*, as it's the mode of aural communication that theater tends to rely on the most. That said, my analysis of voice could be applied to any sounds that are produced by live bodies with the intent to communicate. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that "Communication is not transmission, but a sharing that becomes subject: sharing as subject of all 'subjects.' An unfolding, a dance, a resonance,"<sup>3</sup> meaning that communication as an act that both calls attention to its own existence while also passing on information. It is a vehicle for content and *is content* at the same time. This becomes incredibly useful when thinking about communication in the context of performance, because performance inherently operates in the same way. Performances are constructed (aesthetic) means to conveying messages. Both the 'message' and the 'performance of the message' are received and evaluated by the audiences. The 'subject' of a performance, then is the performances' subject, but also the performance itself, or the way the performance conveys its subject.

Similarly, theater is a mode of performance that investigates the material presented on stage, but also the way that we communicate with one another (including theater's own form and structure). Characters mishearing each other is a classic dramatic tool for both farce and drama. Annie Baker's plays are a continuation of playwrights' fascination with the way that people communicate with each other, particularly the way that people talk with one another. Before I get to Baker's work, and her approach to representing the way people talk and listen, it's important to look at the tool with which we speak: our voices. "What singles out the voice against the vast ocean of sounds and noises, what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning," Mladen Dolar writes, "The voice is something which points toward meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning."<sup>4</sup> Listening, then, is to follow this arrow. Since the voice can only point towards meaning (there are things that are beyond words), listening is as imperfect and interpretive an act as speech. This is where the dramas and farces of the past (Shakespeare and Wilde come to mind immediately) that utilize the listener's fallibility find their routes of investigation. Baker, on the other hand, focuses her work on the pain and labor it takes to get the simplest sentences and intentions out of one's mouth, rather than the chaos that happens once they're already said.

Voice has meaning, only in that it is interpreted to have meaning by the listener. The listener controls what they'll take away from something, not the speaker. Here is an example from Dolar, about pre-linguistic communication, in particularly a so-called primal scream: "The first scream may be caused by pain, by the need for

food, by frustration and anxiety, but the moment the other hears it, the moment it assumes the place of its addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit an answer.”<sup>5</sup> So while the voice carries meaning, it is also itself meaning—in that when it is heard, the listener extracts meaning without (and beyond) the intention of the person making the noise. This connects back to performance is a vehicle for presenting information, but something that contains information in the performance itself. Performances are dependent on their audiences for meaning in the same way as the voice— whatever meaning a performance seeks to construct must be accepted (and thusly co-created) by its audience. Audiences shape the performances they attend for themselves, their fellow audience members, and even the performers— something I will discuss in further detail later on.

Speaking and listening are both vulnerable acts, according to Dolar, and they are for Annie Baker, too. To speak is to elicit an answer—to get something out of— another person, a paradigm that Annie Baker is fascinated with in her work. Communication, to Baker, always comes with high stakes, because we are always afraid of saying something that will harm ourselves, or the person we’re talking to. Baker chooses to dramatize moments of clunky interpersonal connection—her speakers are always stepping on their own toes, with dialogue that doesn’t flow as much as it dribbles. “We never sound the way we want to sound,” she says in an interview with Adam Greenfield. “We’re always stopping ourselves in mid-sentence

because we're so terrified of saying the wrong thing. Speaking is a kind of misery. And I guess I comfort myself by finding the rhythms and accidental poetry in everyone's inadequate attempts to articulate their thoughts.”<sup>6</sup> Therein lies the drama and allure of Annie Baker’s writing. She suggests effective and easy communication is, essentially, impossible, but also an unavoidable part of being alive. Her plays (and their success) show that watching people slog their way through it fascinates us. Our attempts are doomed to fail, and yet we have no other choice to keep on trying. She reiterates this in the same interview, saying, “We're all sort of quietly suffering as we go about our days, trying and failing to communicate to other people what we want and what we believe.”<sup>7</sup>

This quiet suffering rears its head over and over in Baker’s plays. Her characters are often trying to forge connections with each other, and they fall short more often than not. Here’s an example from Baker’s *Circle Mirror Transformation* between two people who are in an adult-education acting class together:

THERESA. So what do you think?

SCHULTZ. I ah...?

THERESA. About the class.

SCHULTZ. Huh. Well ...

*(He glances nervously towards the door)*

Uh ... I like it. I don’t feel ... I guess I’m having a little trouble feeling totally comfortable?

THERESA. Yeah.

SCHULTZ. I feel pretty self-conscious.

THERESA. You’ll get the hang of it.

SCHULTZ. You seem so ... you’re so good at everything.

THERESA. Well. I’m / actually –

SCHULTZ. You do everything in such a ... you’re so graceful.

THERESA. Oh god. That’s ...

*(She shakes her head and grins. They look at each other. A long silence.)*

THERESA. Schultz.

SCHULTZ. What.

THERESA. Do you maybe wanna get a cup of coffee after class?

Or um...

*(Schultz stands there, speechless. Theresa is confused. After a long pause:)*

THERESA. I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong?

SCHULTZ. No.

I mean yes.

Didn't I say yes?

THERESA. You didn't say anything.

SCHULTZ. Oh god. Yes.

I'm sorry. I thought I said yes.

Yes!<sup>8</sup>

This is the first time that Theresa and Schultz interact one-on-one in the play, and their relationship grows and wilts along with the six-week acting class that *Circle Mirror Transformation* follows. Each character has trouble expressing themselves in this moment, stumbling over the simplest responses to the simplest questions. Schultz even forgets that he didn't answer Theresa after she finally asks him to get coffee with her. Theresa and Schultz are interested in each other and want to connect, and the hurdle that faces them is the fallibility of their own communication skills. It is Baker's knack for writing scenes like this that make her plays distinct and that highlight the special attention she pays to the way that people interact.

A deep relationship between 'voice' and 'dramaturgy' emerges when thinking about Dolan's conception of the voice as an object that points towards meaning. "The voice in theatre has become so commonly associated with its written material, that which is found in the drama if studied closely enough or enshrined in a script if it is a record of things spoken, that its theatrical purpose has become enmeshed with the various functions of the text," Lynne Kendrick writes.<sup>9</sup> Kendrick points out the strong

connection between written text and the spoken voice in theater, demonstrating how text shapes the way plays ‘feel.’ Paula Vogel uses the term ‘plasticity’ to describe the playwright’s voice on the page, imbedded in everything that’s “between the lines.”<sup>10</sup> It defines both the texture and feel of the piece, as well as the writer’s intent and conception behind the play. Baker places listening at the center of her work, and illuminates the way that people listen and talk through her dialogue, but also through her plays’ theatricality—installing silences and pauses that do not allow the audience to completely sink into the world of the play. Kendrick complains that text has been distanced from the sonic, yet this so-called distant relationship is central to every scene Baker writes. Baker seems determined to drag it back into the forefront of the audience’s mind and theatrical experience.

Aural communication is elemental and ancient, but also constructed, a paradox that is investigated through theater which takes care to listen. Dolar argues that “[Voice] seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand—the nature of a paradise lost—and on the other hand to transcend language, the cultural and symbolic barriers, in the opposite direction, as it were: it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns.”<sup>11</sup> In performance, there is a similar anxiety that plays itself out as the constructed divide between the ‘high’ art and ‘low.’ While each are dependent on the voice as a means of communication, it seems that their directionality is different. Taylor Mac reiterates this this when discussing his piece *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, a day-long musical that explores the United States’ history through pop songs from each decade, all the way back to 1776. Mac says that while classical

music reaches for “the hem of God,” it takes popular music’s imperfection to reach the people.<sup>12</sup> In essence, the differing conception of music from classical to popular are not necessarily in how they are written, but in how they are expected to be received by the people. Voice is essential to the way performance is produced, both practically and conceptually. Understanding voice and performance as ephemeral objects shapes the understanding of listening as an immediate, interpretive act.

Performance, Presence, & Ephemera

I've discussed the voice, and its relationship to both theater and listening, and now I'll discuss the in-the-moment nature of performance, another piece of intellectual connective tissue between voice, listening, and theater. The voice is an ephemeral material object. Sound waves are produced, they reverberate, and eventually they disappear. Their existence is finite. Because of this, audiences are tasked to be in the present moment when they are at performances. Performances only happen once, just as a sentence can only be spoken once (with each repetition its own object, and every recording a representation of the original). Even if a play has a years-long run, and is a well-oiled machine, the audience is different every night, and what they see is a different performance than the night before. Performances and the voice are both nonpermanent objects that only can interact with their audiences (or listeners) at the same time that they are produced. Annie Baker latches onto this in her work, constantly strategically reminding her audience of their position as guests in her theatrical worlds.

This is a trait that the voice— and all sound— has in common with performance as communicative objects. Performance is a nonpermanent event-object as defined by Peggy Phelan, when she wrote, “Performance’s only life is in the present,” and continued to describe that once a performance is documented, “or otherwise participate[s] in the circulation of representations *of* representations [...] it becomes something other than performance.”<sup>13</sup> To reiterate, the voice, which, according to Dolar, “fades away the moment it is produced,”<sup>14</sup> is similar to performance in this way, aligning the role of ‘audience’ and ‘listener’ on the receiving end of these modes

of communication. Since performances only exist in the present, to analyze performance is to reflect on the memory of the object, rather than the thing itself. This places the present—and presence— at a premium. Often, performances are almost entirely crafted around capturing and holding onto the audience’s attention. Visual and aural spectacle, plots that twist and turn, and humor are all theatrical conventions that, at their core, are meant to re-engage and re-stimulate the audience at a regular pace. This is where Baker’s work is again revolutionary: it dares the audience to engage, coaxing them to the edge of their seats through silences and pauses. When Baker does introduce spectacular elements to her work, they are as understated as her dialogue.

In her play *John*, Baker imposes a mode of theatricality through the play’s transitions. Rather than split the scenes apart with blackouts, Baker tasks Mertis, the old woman who runs the B&B that serves as the setting of the play, to move the hand of the living room’s grandfather clock forward between each scene, dragging the play forward in time as she does so. “If she isn’t the last person onstage, she stealthily creeps onstage between scenes to move time forward,” Baker adds in her pre-dialogue notes in the script.<sup>15</sup> While this is perhaps the most overt metatheatrical motif in Annie Baker’s work, each of her plays seem to dramaturgically wink at the audience’s presence. Putting theater games onstage (in *Circle Mirror Transformation*) and having rows of theater seats as a set (in *The Flick*) both nudge audiences to remember that they are at the theater themselves, and that their job as audience members is to be present and to listen. While simultaneously reminding the audience of their situational contract as listeners, Baker ventures to test their patience,

instituting long silences in her plays. This turns the audience's focus inward, to their own state of listening. She invites her audiences to participate in the piece by giving it their attention, by sticking with her through plays that tend to stretch towards three hours in length.

By attending any performance, the audience actively shapes their own experience, and the experience of others. Laughing, sighing, or even walking out of a theater are all 'standard' ways of interacting with a performance, with some more conscious than others. An audience member's experience is individualized based on what they pay attention to— following one performer, subplot, or theatrical element can define the performance in a way beyond what the performance's director or actors were intending. This license to focus individually during the act of consuming performance is comes from performance's demand for attention and engagement on the part of its consumer. Phelan explains, "There are no left-overs, [so] the gazing spectator must try to take everything in. Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility- in a maniacally charged present- and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control."<sup>16</sup> The audience has a keen awareness that the performance in front of them is slipping away at the same time that they are taking it in. They take care to give themselves over to the work in front of them, investing their attention with the understanding that whatever they miss is unrecoverable.

Listening, then, for audiences, is the urgent task of being and becoming fully immersed in the performances they see. Jean-Luc Nancy states that "To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me

as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place.”<sup>17</sup> Nancy describes the osculating focus that the listener experiences between themselves and the thing they are experiencing, giving something of themselves to the experience, as well as taking something away, opening themselves up, on multiple levels and on multiple fronts. He also seeks to externalize listening: listening engages not the neck up, but the entire being of the listener. Home-Cook calls this “the phenomenal dynamics of embodied attending” is a kind of full-body, experiential theory of listening Home-Cook investigates.<sup>18</sup> This presents itself in Baker’s work, again through the silence and quiet. Baker takes her audiences through silences, the pauses are both familiar and uncomfortable to experience, as we are used to them from our day-to-day lives, yet so unfamiliar with them on stage. We endure them because Baker, through her writing, is able to get her audience invested in her plays, her characters, and the tiny arcs of daily drama that nevertheless carry an immense amount of weight. The audience also understands that the performance that they are attending is only temporary—they will get up, they will go home, and continue on with their lives unlocked from the silence that Baker imposes.

Performance is perhaps the quintessential example of ephemeral experience. There is an understanding among everyone who participates in a performance that performance will only last so long, and that, when it is over, the relationship between the performer(s) and their audience and the audience’s relationship with each other will dissolve. Jose Muñoz defines the ephemera as “firmly anchored *within* the social.

Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived.”<sup>19</sup> An ephemeral experience, much like Peggy Phelan’s definition of performance, seems to be just as defined by what it leaves behind than what it produces. Just as sound waves fade away into memory, performances come to an end, only to be relived as representations of themselves, one friend telling another about the play they saw and how it was good, although perhaps a little slow.

### Silence & Quiet

Hearing text is the cornerstone of consuming modern drama. Plays are taught in performance, but also as pieces of text, with entire courses focused on reading and analyzing significant plays from the past. Moments in plays that are punctuated without text are unusual, because silence on stage is a break from the expected social relationship between performers and their audiences. Yet, Annie Baker's plays use silence as a theatrical mode almost as much as dialogue. This adds to the naturalistic feel to Baker's work—people are not constantly conversing in real life. The amount of silence Baker prescribes for her plays also works theatrically to not allow the audience to necessarily get swept away by what is happening, but to instead emotionally invest in the play through (or even despite) its spare dialogue. Her plays become less about what is said than about what is left unsaid. They live in the tension between people who yearn to connect with one another rather than the satisfying sizzle of a seamless conversation concocted for the stage.

Silence, even when experienced among a group of people, tends to spur introspection. Kevin Quashie writes in his book about quiet and quietness, that “the idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior. This shift can feel like a kind of heresy if the interior is thought of as apolitical or inexpressive, which it is not: one's inner life is raucous and full of expression, especially if we distinguish the term ‘expressive’ from the notion of public. Indeed, the interior could be understood as the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life.”<sup>20</sup> Although Quashie writes about quiet specifically as it relates to blackness, his critique here can be used in the context of the individual

experience of quiet. In this context, Annie Baker writes plays that are undeniably ‘quiet’ in the way that Quashie describes. They are written to almost shockingly reflect everyday language and communication and are lyrical only in their mundanity. Her characters stumble over their own words, and sit in uncomfortable silences, confined together by circumstance and relationship (much like an audience is ‘confined’ to the theater they watch the play in). Silence deepens the language just as it is a mode of language in and of itself.

Baker also uses silence in a way to call her audience’s attention to the fact that they are listening to a piece of theater. The impatient feeling that there is ‘nothing happening’ during silent moments onstage is unfamiliar. To quote Dolar, “The absence of voices and sounds is hard to endure; complete silence is immediately uncanny, it is like death, while the voice is the first sign of life.”<sup>21</sup> Silence, to the extent that Baker uses it, tends to throw her audiences off. Her plays are littered with pauses and silences, halting the flow of the dialogue, injecting real life awkwardness into relationships. By creating a more ‘accurate’ representation of the way we communicate on stage, Baker (ironically, perhaps) creates more distance between her audience and the theater that they are attending, since silence and bumbling are so unfamiliar to the stage.

It’s almost frustrating to find an example of what I’m talking about from her plays, because the pauses and silences are spread so evenly, and are baked into every moment of her writing. Take this scene from *The Aliens*:

EVAN. Uh.

(Pause.)

KJ. He died.

*(Evan looks at him uncomprehendingly. Pause.)*

KJ. Jasper died.

EVAN. ...No he didn't.

KJ. He died a week ago.

*(Pause.)*

EVAN. No.

*(KJ nods.)*

EVAN. Come on. Stop it.

*(A pause.)*

No he didn't.

*(Silence.)*

Why are you... stop fucking with me.

*(Pause.)*

You just said he was sick!

KJ. I'm sorry.

I'm really really sorry.

EVAN. Why are you saying that?

*(KJ shrugs. Silence.)*

*(Evan Walks over to the big recycling bin and tries to knock it over. But this is hard to do. The recycling bin is very, very heavy. It takes Evan a long time. For a while, it seems like he's not going to be able to do it. Then, finally, he tips it over. The sound of glass bottles falling. Maybe a few roll out onto the ground.)*

*(Evan walks inside.)*

*(KJ is alone.)*

*(After a long time Evan walks out again. He is holding an oatmeal raisin cookie.)\_*

EVAN. What did he die of.<sup>22</sup>

The pauses break up the rhythm of the scene, and the longest extended silence (that is, time without any dialogue) happens when Evan is otherwise physically engaged,

trying to knock over the recycling bin. The height of the drama in the scene, the height of the character's emotional arc, happens without any dialogue. The audience is left to take in that sight on their own, with no dialogue to distract them from what is happening. It cannot be overstated how radical this is—how unique it is for both actors to play out that final moment, uninhibited by language, and to force the audience to take it in without language's mediation. Here, Baker prescribes silence as a disquieting quiet for her audience to endure.

Her audiences and her characters experience Baker's silences together, each with a different kind of agony. The amount of silence she uses often means that her plays are long, usually three hours or longer. Hilton Als explains, "By not rushing things—by letting the characters develop as gradually and inevitably as rain or snowfall—Baker returns us to the naturalistic but soulful theatre that many of her contemporaries and near-contemporaries have disavowed in their rush to be 'postmodern.'"<sup>23</sup> While the characters agonize over connecting with each other, the audience is left waiting for them to connect, a promise that is rarely (if ever) satisfyingly fulfilled. Instead, communication between characters breaks down, as it does, or people leave, as they do, and the world of the play changes only in that something of significance to a character has happened there. Annie Baker finds stories that seem small in terms of how they shape the world but carry huge personal impact for the people who live them. Baker hears these stories and writes them in a way that allows the subtle underpinnings of complicated relationships to come to light in a slow, methodical, almost musical way.

This is why Annie Baker is a radical, experimental playwright. While the ‘scope’ of her plays are pea-sized compared to the work of some other dramatists, the quiet, mostly silent theatricality that Baker employs pushes her audiences to reexamine the way we interact with one another in such a poignant way. Quashie writes that “quiet helps us to understand the activism involved in being aware, in paying attention, in considering. So much of how we make sense of the world is through social identities, as well as through a discourse of cause and effect: this happens because of that, this produces that. Sometimes these firm logics undermine the opportunity to be in wonder at what is happening to you as well as to be aware that you ‘happen’ to the world.”<sup>24</sup> Baker utilizes quiet to this end in her work. By situating her audience within scenes of quiet, she asks them to turn inward, making them aware of the theatricality of what they are experiencing, of what the character and actor are doing and going through, and what effect it is having on them, all at once. By providing silence, she provides space for her audience’s consternation. By giving the audience nothing to listen to, she forces them to listen to themselves.

### Attention

Going to see a play requires attention. That is, to experience a play, you must be paying attention to it. You cannot wander through a theater anytime and see a show, like an art gallery, nor can you choose when and how much to take in, like a book or with television. Furthermore, the actors are in the same room with you, experiencing what is happening along with the audience. Something similar can be said about listening. George Home-Cook argues that “listening is not only something that we do, but is inherently *theatrical*. As a specialized mode of *attention*, listening both manipulates and is manipulated by the phenomenon of sound, in a dynamic dance from and through which experience is born.”<sup>25</sup> Listening is to be both drawn into and interpreting sound at the same time. It is dramatic and engaging, both physically and mentally. It shapes experience and also *is* the experience. This conception of listening as a form of attendance is representative of the active feedback loop that is created between audiences and performers as a two-way, almost physiological phenomenon. Sound avails itself as a tool of performance in a unique and sneakily powerful way— it shapes the way that the audience engages with the piece, which dictates how they experience the piece, and therefore the energy they put back into the room.

Listening is to pay a kind of directional attention, where the listener is selective in what they’re taking in and also processing. Aural attention is central to Ross Brown’s theory of listening; he calls listening “an anxious tug-of-war between engagement and distraction,”<sup>26</sup> especially in the context of an audience at a performance. This sets up the idea of an “audience” as mass of people, all battling

distractions in order to stay focused on the piece in front of them. From their own bodies (itches, hunger) to the people next to them (coughs, celebrities, elbows) to the environment in and outside the theater (the sound of rain, a siren, frescoes), audience members are tasked with shutting things out in order to open themselves to the performance onstage. The performance, then, is expected to keep each audience member engaged above all else, and every other task of the performance (move the audience, teach the audience, touch the audience) is both secondary to, and dependent on, the performers' ability to keep the audience's attention. As I've discussed earlier, Baker engages with this paradigm by writing plays that are quiet and employ silence beyond what audiences expect.

In order to invoke the kind of attention that she requires from her audiences, Annie Baker herself is an extremely attentive person. Sarah Larson, in her *New Yorker* profile of Baker, describes the playwright as someone "who listens to people so carefully, who re-creates human speech with such amusement and care, that her characters feel startlingly familiar—so familiar, in fact, that you might wonder at first why they're the subjects of a play."<sup>27</sup> It is this familiarity and the idea of importance (or lack thereof), that Baker examines through her work. Her attentiveness to the details of conversation invites the audience to reconsider what kinds of interactions are considered important. She gives weight to everyday conversation that may not seem life-defining, but without question influences and carries heavy significance. It is this attentiveness to the drama and pain of everyday communication that the audience is left to ruminate on as they watch Baker's characters complete mundane,

sometimes mindless tasks often with nothing to take their mind off of their work besides the other person in the scene with them.

*The Flick*, perhaps Annie Baker’s most famous play, features three characters who work for a movie theater. She describes their costumes as a “degrading” “polo shirt (probably dark blue or purple or maroon) with a little name tag/pin and black pants.”<sup>28</sup> The first scene of the play starts like this:

SAM

We call this the walkthrough.

*Pause.*

SAM

Pretty simple.

You just ah...

*Avery watches as Sam walks down the last row of seats with his broom, sweeping up popcorn kernels, etc., and pushing them into the dust pan. When Sam finishes the last row and moves to the second-to-last row, Avery awkwardly begins sweeping the last row on his side of the aisle. They continue this way, Sam always one row ahead of Avery, each on his own side of the aisle. Avery is trying to figure out the best way to sweep; it’s harder than it looks. In the third-to-last row, Avery encounters something we cannot see on the floor. He frowns with distaste, then bends over and gingerly picks up a Subway sandwich wrapper. Tiny pieces of shredded lettuce flutter to the ground. Sam looks over, stops what he’s doing, and watches Avery, without offering any suggestions.*

*Avery walks up the aisle, throws the Subway wrapper in the large trash can, along with the contents of his dust pan, then walks back and goes back to sweeping. For some reason it’s not working—the tiny pieces of lettuce that we can’t see are sticking to the ground. Sam is still watching him. After a while:*

SAM

Yeah. With the little pieces of lettuce you kind of have to—

*Avery interrupts him by bending down to hand-pick the pieces of lettuce off the floor. He mostly disappears from view. Sam watches, then goes back to sweeping. He's about three rows ahead of Avery when Avery finishes picking up the tiny pieces of lettuce. Cradling them in his palm, Avery walks up the aisle again to the trash can and shakes his palm off into it. Then he goes back to sweeping. After the next row:*

EVERY

What do you do about spilled soda?<sup>29</sup>

The first action that Baker's audience sees is two men sweeping a movie theater.

While there are things that become ingeniously clear over the course of this few paragraphs of stage direction (it's Avery's first day, and he is clearly taking cues from Sam; this is the kind of theater where people sneak in their own food; there is soda spilled on the ground), they are all discovered in silence between two people who are not yet comfortable enough with each other to make small talk beyond the task at hand. Structurally, the scene also acts as a sort of litmus test for the audience. Baker starts her play out with a heavy dose of the quiet that continues throughout the rest of the script, adjusting her audience to her play world by plunging them into silence, and reintroducing language. Even Sam's first line after the long silence is jarring and even heightened, even though it's not even a complete sentence, and it has to do with bits of lettuce being difficult to sweep.

By introducing so much silence into her plays, each line, no matter how mumbled, is heightened. In Baker's work, replacing language with silence actually zooms in on the detail of everyday language. She makes the audience wait for each line. She entices them to be as attentive as they possibly can be to every word that gets spoken on stage. In interview, she remembers, "When I was seventeen I started

secretly recording people and then transcribing everything, twenty pages of a so-called banal conversation, and then marveling at how beautiful it was when you just write down exactly what people say.”<sup>30</sup> Baker’s writing is about the way people talk, and every aspect of her plays serve to point her audience towards attending what is being spoken on stage. The language in her plays are the most important parts, despite the focus that her silences or the meta-theatrical aspects of her plays draw, every dramaturgical tool that Baker uses serves the language of her plays first and foremost.

### Conclusion

In theater, listening works on multiple levels—it is the audience’s task, a structural tool, and a writing practice. Performance, and especially theater, is an aural medium as much as it is a physical one, and the way that sound and silence plays a part in shaping theater is still getting explored, even beyond the scope of the audience’s ears. The term ‘aural,’ Ross Brown points out, also refers to a tactile sense of place. George Home-Cook responds to this, saying that “implicitly, Brown’s ‘aural phenomenology of theatre’ not only attends to the experience of hearing with one’s ears, but also to the ways in which we sense the world around us by means of the ‘closely interrelated skin/air senses.’”<sup>31</sup> Listening, then, is both hearing and feeling. Listening is an awareness of space and location. Listening is both the things we are actively paying attention to (“What did she say?”) to the things we aren’t (the dust in the air). Just as the term ‘dramaturgy’ reflects both the in-the-moment and over-arching dramatic structures of a play, ‘listening’ is a state of being in the moment that can be primed, manipulated, and called attention to through performance.

This is what Annie Baker’s plays experiment with: how people cohabitate and communicate, successfully and unsuccessfully. What does it look like to try and communicate with someone and fail, despite *both* of your best intentions? How does one write contemporary dialogue accurately, and how does one get their audience to not only be interested by that quotidian language, but be moved by it? Her plays are theatrically sonic, with Baker’s own dramaturgical ethos of the everyday baked into every pause, silence and ‘um’ that her characters utter, as well as the stories that she

puts onstage. Externally “low-stakes” drama that nevertheless means everything to the people who are going through what’s happening. The type of drama that consumes the back of your mind while you are completing other tasks throughout your day, rather than the all (time) consuming upheaval of theatrical convention. She is by no means the only playwright who is invested in listening as a tool of performance, and for writing. To conclude this essay, I want to point to a few other writers’ works, and the ways that listening is unfolding as an essential practice across contemporary playwriting, beyond the practicality of writing and rewriting, but as a dramaturgical cornerstone of the contemporary practice.

Taylor Mac is a drag queen, theater artist, and playwright who gained notoriety in New York’s downtown cabaret scene, and whose piece, *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. The show, a 24-hour long musical revue of American pop music is a queer interrogation of American history on such an epic scale I hesitate to call it merely a “play.” Rather than espousing ideas out of the blue, Taylor Mac chooses to illuminate moments in history in order to debate them. Mac writes: “I believe, as a theater artist, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Because I believe, as a theater artist, I’m not a teacher; I’m a reminder. I’m just trying to remind you of things you’ve dismissed, forgotten, or buried.”<sup>32</sup> Mac, by his own admission, is not interested in the ‘new’ as much as he wants to be reflective of reality. Mac is more interested in being a careful listener and curator, picking songs, people, and histories, to amplify on stage. This also gives Mac the power to mess with the history that he places onstage. For instance, in *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, Mac reproduces *The Mikado*, but sets it on Mars

rather than Japan. This honors Gilbert & Sullivan's intention to set the piece in an unfamiliar place (in order to critique western society), but also dishonors and disgraces the racist/colonialist choice to set the play in Japan, a real place with a real history, rather than somewhere made up, like a fictionalized version of Mars.

Just because Mac believes in presenting the past through his work does not mean he sees himself as any less of a storyteller. In another section of Mac's manifesto, he writes, "I believe whole-heartedly in craft. I believe craft is essentially a commitment to learning the past, living in the present, and dreaming the culture forward. But I believe establishing standards for craft will not create great art but will foster the patriarchy."<sup>33</sup> Mac still believes in quality of work, or perhaps, an aspiration towards quality, but without the same, strict assessment that has been traditionally handed down in the world of theater. If Mac sees himself as a collector and re-teller and re-shaper of history, then the way that Mac's version of history is presented needs to be as thoroughly engaging to the audience as possible. Between the news, classrooms, and conventional wisdom, a lot of Mac's work takes on topics that audiences may feel that they already know about or understand. Yet, Mac is able to turn household subjects on their head—whether it is a touching, almost unrecognizable cover of "Kiss Me Through the Phone" at Joe's Pub or getting audience members to throw ping pong balls at each other in order to simulate the Civil War. He listens to the culture around him, and brings it to light in a new way for his audiences, repackaging familiar material so it sounds new and original.

A contemporary playwright who uses listening as a step in her writing process is Lynn Nottage. Her play *Sweat* (which won the Pulitzer in 2017) was originated

from Nottage spending a two-year period in Reading, PA, the poorest city in America for its size. She describes her initial experience going to Reading as a “listening tour.” She explains, “I was there to try and help answer many questions that I had about what was happening to our country as a whole, and I didn’t find *Sweat* until I sat down with a group of steel workers.”<sup>34</sup> At that meeting, Nottage heard the story of workers shut out by their management and the wedges that had been forced between friends and neighbors, along socio-economic, racial, and union lines. It was a story that felt familiar to her, and something that she could discuss and dissect on stage. Nottage and her team kept on talking to people: “We interviewed as many people as possible to find out what was happening in the city, from the police chief, to the homeless, to small business owners, to social workers. We targeted a real wide cross-section of folk who represented the range of people living in Reading,” she said,<sup>35</sup> making sure that a steady dramaturgical foundation had been laid for her play beyond just the people that the piece profiles. The result is a play that is extremely grounded in real experience, and real people, but is also lyrical and moving. By positioning herself as a listener during her writing process, Nottage puts her audience in the same position—opening them up to the lived experience of others by hearing about those experiences first-hand in order to retell them.

Young Jean Lee is another playwright for whom listening is a key part of the creating new work. Lee’s process is based on the principle that she, as the writer, can offer something to a room of people, and the collaborators that she has assembled there can take that and run with it, and give her the necessary feedback to make it better, or closer to realization. “The way that I work is I basically bring pieces of texts

into a room and then everybody in the room tells me what they think of it,” she says, “And everybody in the room has been very carefully selected to be smart and articulate and people I trust. They tell me, they react, they do stuff. I listen to everybody, so it’s really not the case for me that I’m not an auteur in the sense that I have this great sort of vision in my head of how I want things to be. And then everybody helps me achieve that vision. It’s like my vision is much more sort of nebulous. Just so much of my work comes from the performers and comes from whoever happens to be in the room at the time.”<sup>36</sup> Lee, essentially, sees a vague endpoint, and collects collaborators and processes to get her work to where she wants it to be. This produces wildly different plays—the more ‘accessible’ *Straight White Men* is contrasted with *Untitled Feminist Show*, a piece she constructed with Faye Driscoll, and which is a nude experimental dance show.

All of these writers, from Baker to Lee, have a keen awareness of their own style and their own method. “To feel is always also to feel oneself feel [*se snetir sentir*], but the subject who feels ‘himself’ thus does not exist or is ‘himself’ only in this feeling, through it and even actually is it. There is no subject that is not a sentient subject,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes.<sup>37</sup> Playwrights, sentient to their own subjectivity, not only pass along the many dramaturgical voices that they have collected just through the act of writing, but are constantly self-interrogating and shaping their own voices through the work that they take in. Taylor Mac, Young Jean Lee, and Lynn Nottage all cultivate dramaturgical voices and histories around their work, setting up what Lee calls a “scaffolding” to build their plays.<sup>38</sup> They are hyper-aware of their positionality in relation to the subjects of their plays, and use that awareness to their advantage.

They carefully craft pieces that explore the closeness or distance felt between the writer and the topics that they write about, whether explicitly on stage, their program notes, or baked into the conception of the piece as a whole.

Annie Baker's writing process also involves her literally listening to her own play over and over, before she ever brings it to a rehearsal room. Pace and its determinant rhythm is something that Baker actively wrestles with while writing, and in order to engage with the rhythm of her shows, she reads her work aloud to herself. She even records herself reading and plays it back to see if the play feels the way she wants. "I do this because it's so important to me that I capture the cadences of painful, ordinary speech, and it's hard to tell if it's believable when it's on the page," she says, in an interview with Adam Greenfield, the Literary Manager of Playwrights Horizons while *The Flick* was staged there. "So even though I'm a pretty bad actor, I record myself reading all the parts and sitting through all the pauses, and then I listen to it a bunch of times. If I can hear the writer writing, like if there's thinly-disguised exposition or a nudge to the audience or some kind of obvious point made, I go back and change it."<sup>39</sup> Baker's painstaking approach to captivating the 'ordinary' goes as far as taking as many active steps as she can to iron out her own 'voice' as a writer in her own work. This is not a unique aspect of her writing process—there are many playwrights who continue to tweak their work even past opening night, but it speaks to the dedication that Baker has to the aural nature of her plays, the silent fabric of her work, and how she can lull her audiences into paying attention.

So, listening is baked into the dramaturgy of contemporary theater, from audience expectations, to modes of theatricality. Playwrights are stretching

themselves as listeners and stretching how they engage with the audience as listening subjects. Theater is a live art form—it is performed by and on live bodies for live audiences, and that inherent, in-the-moment paradigm that is central to performance is also central to listening and engaging with the listening ‘self’ of both the audience and artist.

Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Nancy, Jean Luc, *Listening*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 4.
- <sup>2</sup> Larson, Sarah, “The Funny, Emphatic Genius of Annie Baker,” *New Yorker*, September 17, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Nancy, *Listening*, 41.
- <sup>4</sup> Dolar, Mladen, *A Voice and Nothing More*, (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2006), 14.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Baker, Annie, “Annie Baker Discusses *Circle Mirror Transformation* with Playwrights Horizons Literary Manager Adam Greenfield,” Interview by Adam Greenfield, Huntington Theatre Company, Text.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Baker, Annie, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2010), 28-29.
- <sup>9</sup> Home-Cook, George, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 36.
- <sup>10</sup> Crespo, Melissa, “Paula Vogel on Plasticity,” filmed at Bake off 2014 at the Yale School of Drama, New Haven, CT, video, 1:34.
- <sup>11</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 31.
- <sup>12</sup> Mac, Taylor, “Taylor Mac Artist Interview,” interview by Tim Sanford, *Playwrights Horizons*.
- <sup>13</sup> Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.
- <sup>14</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 59.
- <sup>15</sup> Baker, Annie. *John*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2016,) 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 148.
- <sup>17</sup> Nancy, *Listening*, 11.
- <sup>18</sup> Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*, 33.
- <sup>19</sup> Muñoz, Jose Esteban, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2, (1996), 10-11
- <sup>20</sup> Quashie, Kevin, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2012,) 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 13-14.
- <sup>22</sup> Baker, Annie. *The Aliens*, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2011,) 50-52.
- <sup>23</sup> Als, Hilton, “The Way Station,” *New Yorker*, August 24, 2015.
- <sup>24</sup> Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, 72.
- <sup>25</sup> Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*, 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Brown, Ross, “Towards Theatre Noise,” in *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, ed. Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner, (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Larson, Sarah, “The Funny, Emphatic Genius of Annie Baker.”
- <sup>28</sup> Baker, Annie, *The Flick*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group), 5.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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- <sup>30</sup> Baker, Annie, “Annie Baker,” Interview by Elianna Kan, *Bomb Magazine*, September 15, 2015, Text.
- <sup>31</sup> Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*, 36.
- <sup>32</sup> Mac, Taylor, “I Believe.”
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Nottage, Lynn, “A Playwright on the Rust Belt,” interview by Aisha Harris, *The Gist*, Slate, May 31, 2017, Audio, 23:59.
- <sup>35</sup> Buckner, Jocelyn L., “On Creativity and Collaboration: A Conversation with Lynn Nottage, Seret Scott, and Kate Whoriskey,” in *A Critical Companion to Lynn Nottage*, edited by Jocelyn L. Buckner, (London: Routledge, 2016), 187.
- <sup>36</sup> Lee, Young Jean, “Young Jean Lee,” interviewed by Richard Maxwell, *Bomb Magazine*, November 6, 2008.
- <sup>37</sup> Nancy, Jean-Luc. “Ascoltando,” in *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, by Peter Szendy, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), ix-x.
- <sup>38</sup> Lee, Young Jean, interview.
- <sup>39</sup> Baker, Annie, interview.

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